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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, SCA/RA

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SUBJECT: TIGHT TIMETABLE TO PREPARE FOR PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS

REF: COLOMBO 492

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Excitement and expectations are building for what Maldivians hope will be their country's first ever free and fair Presidential elections in the fall of 2008. Opposition parties failed to agree on a single "Alliance" candidate to contest against the presumptive ruling DRP party candidate President Gayoom. They described the extensive jockeying that is taking place between opposition parties to determine possible alliances and between parties that are allied with the DRP. They expressed concern to Ambassador about the very short timetable that remains to complete work on the Constitution, get it ratified by the President and then have Parliament pass the 70 or 80 bills that would be needed to implement the Constitution and establish the independent institutions that would oversee the Presidential elections. They attached particular importance to the creation of an independent Election Commission, an independent judiciary, and guidelines to ensure equal access to the media for all Presidential candidates. They also expressed concern about growing human rights abuses in Maldivian jails. Foreign Minister Shahid responded that the Government is very conscious of the short time table and heavy agenda that remains. He told Ambassador the new electoral law is being drafted, draft media guidelines will be shared with the opposition, and Parliament will choose the 5-member Election Commission and the Chief Justice. The Commission will then set the date for the Presidential elections. he promised to look into reports of prison abuse, but alleged the opposition is using these to mobilize the international community against the Government. Ambassador also held a press conference to reinforce the need for independent institutions to supervise and ensure free and fair elections (transcript will be available shortly on the Maldives Virtual Presence Post website). End Summary.

Alliance is Dead - Parties to Contest Separately

¶2. (C) In a meeting with the former Ministers who now comprise the "New Maldives," they admitted that opposition parties had failed to agree on a single "Alliance" candidate to contest against the presumptive ruling DRP party candidate President Gayoom. They described the extensive jockeying that is taking place between opposition parties to determine possible alliances and between parties that are allied with the DRP. New Maldives spokesman Dr. Ahmed Shaheed warned of

the creeping danger of "plutocracy" which he characterized as the growing tendency for very wealthy business people in the Maldives to buy influence with political parties. He mentioned, for example, the role of Finance Minister Gasim Ibrahim who has extended his "tentacles" into many different parties. Gasim owns the Villa group which in turn owns Sun Island (Maldives largest resort), several other lucrative resorts, Trans Maldivian Airways (one of Maldives two principal air taxi services) and many other interests. Shaheed alleged that Gasim uses his wealth to pay for scholarships for the children of politician families, their medical bills abroad, as well as their political campaigns. Two members of the Islamic party Adaalath are now studying in Malaysia at Gasim,s expense.

13. (C) Hassan Saeed, who will be the New Maldives candidate for President, explained that New Maldives is seeking to ally itself with Adaalath and that the Islamic party had been prepared to announce that until Gasim intervened and persuaded them to hold off on announcing any potential alliance.

14. (C) On the DRP side Shaheed and Saeed predict that President Gayoom will run for President and that he will choose Gasim as his running mate and therefore presumptive successor. Also waiting in the wings to potentially compete for DRP votes is the President's younger half brother Yameen, who has his own Presidential ambitions. In the unlikely event that the President does not run, Saeed predicted that Yameen and Gasim would split the DRP party by each forming their own parties. If the President does run and chooses Gasim as his running mate, they predict Yameen will focus on building up the strength of his party in Parliament. All of the New Maldives group believe President Gayoom will wait as long as possible before tipping his hand as to his intentions and thereby keep everyone off balance.

Legislative Priorities: Elections Commission and Courts

15. (C) Ambassador noted that once the Constitution is ratified the Maldivian Parliament will have to pass some 70 to 80 pieces of legislation to implement the new Constitution. Given the short time frame he asked the New Maldives for their views on the priority bills. Saeed and Shaheed responded that the Government's priorities should be those laws to create an independent election commission, establish an independent judiciary, and provide equal access to the media. With respect to the latter, the Media Minister is already in the process of drafting guidelines which they hoped would be shared with all parties. Ambassador undertook to suggest this to the Government (see para 11).

16. (C) Shaheed remarked on some recent media progress. He said the country's first two private television stations have received licenses and are expected to begin broadcasting as early as June. One is Villa TV owned by the aforementioned Minister of Finance Gasim Ibrahim. The second is DTV which will be a sister station to the already popular radio station DFM. Shaheed also praised the Government for shutting down two Government-owned websites that had often been venues for venomous anti-opposition articles. The first was a police website fact.maldives.com. The second was a defense website called themaldivian.org.

17. (C) With respect to the election commission, Shaheed noted that once Parliament passes the necessary electoral law, each of the parties will be authorized to nominate one commission member each, from whom Parliament will then decide on a total of five candidates. Shaheed noted that Yameen and other allies of the ruling DRP party are setting up political parties, partly with the purpose of each nominating candidates for the election commission. Since President Gayoom has a majority in Parliament he can use that majority to stack the commission with members from parties close to the DRP.

Anni is MDP Candidate

¶8. (C) In a separate meeting, members of the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), informed the Ambassador that the party has chosen Mohamed Nasheed (also known as Anni) as the MDP's Presidential candidate in the country's first ever primary election. They also expressed concern about the very short time table that remains to complete work on the Constitution, get it ratified by the President and then have Parliament pass the 70 or 80 bills that would be needed to implement the Constitution and establish the independent institutions that would oversee the Presidential elections. They noted comments by the Attorney General that the earliest the Constitution could be ready for ratification would be June 15th. The President would have 90 days to approve ("ratify" in Maldivian parlance) the Constitution. The MDP expressed concern that the President might delay ratification so that Parliament would have so little time to debate implementing legislation, that the ruling DRP would argue the Government has no choice but to issue the laws by Presidential decree without Presidential debate. They urged Ambassador to ask the Government to proceed as quickly as possible with finalizing the Constitution and ratification so that the appropriate institutions would have time to prepare and supervise free and fair elections. The Ambassador agreed to do so (see para 9).

Time is Short to Prepare for Presidential Elections

¶9. (C) At a later meeting with Foreign Minister Shahid, Ambassador congratulated the Government on the progress it has made thus far in drafting a new constitution and preparing for Presidential elections. However, he expressed concern that the timetable is very short to finish the Constitution, ratify it, pass enabling legislation, and create the independent institutions needed to prepare and supervise the elections. He urged that the Government proceed as quickly as possible and noted that the international community's judgment on the fairness and freedom of the election would hinge on part on the independence and credibility of the election commission and the court system that would oversee it. He also suggested that with time so short it would be prudent for the Government to prioritize and then begin drafting key bills so that there would be time to consult the opposition and make sure they were satisfied with the final laws.

¶10. (C) Shahid responded that the Government is very conscious of the short time table and heavy agenda that remains. He complained that the process is partly out of the Government's hands. The Chairman of the drafting committee that was looking over the final text of the Constitution had gone to campaign in the north, for example. Nevertheless, Finance Minister and Special Majlis Chair Gasim Ibrahim hoped to finalize the Constitution by the end of May. Shahid also noted that the electoral law is in fact being drafted, drawing on the help of a Commonwealth election expert.

¶11. (C) Ambassador urged that in addition to the election law, it would be critical to pass laws that would establish an independent judiciary and provide equal access to the media for all candidates. Shahid responded that the Media Minister had drafted media guidelines to allow equal access, which would be shared with all the parties. He also remarked that the Government was committed to providing equal access during the campaign. Even now, the Government had established "Room 25" where any Presidential candidate can register on the Media Ministry website for a time and then hold a press conference with all the media. He also noted that Hassan Saeed appears twice a week on an independent radio show, while Radio Maldives gives time to NGOs in a weekly program called the Voice of Society.

¶12. (C) Shahid explained that the new draft Constitution mandates that Parliament set up the independent election commission within 30 days of the Constitution's ratification. Five political party candidates would require a 2/3 majority

vote to be approved as commission members. These members would then set the specific date for the Presidential elections. In a similar fashion, the nominee for Chief Justice of the Supreme Court will need a 2/3 majority of Parliament. Shahid candidly noted that these are all totally new concepts, so Maldives can't expect everything to be perfect. He noted for example, critical shortages of trained expertise in many areas of Government responsibility. The Government had already agreed on a provision to appoint foreign judges, most likely from Islamic countries, to fill seats for judges in technical areas such as commercial law.

US Concerned About New Spate of Prison Abuses

¶13. (C) Ambassador noted U.S. concern about spate of recent reports of beatings and other abuses in Maldivian jails. He noted that during a rocky period up to 2006 the Maldives had been accused of significant human rights abuses in prison. Then very few complaints had been made of the last 18 months. Then new reports had emerged recently. Ambassador suggested that new prison abuses would undermine the credit the Maldives has received in the international community for drafting a new Constitution and preparing for free and fair elections.

¶14. (C) Shahid responded that he would look into the complaints with the appropriate authorities. But he also remarked that the timing of these complaints was suspicious and suggested that the opposition might be using these to mobilize the international community against the Government. He explained that the ICRC is free to come visit Maldivian prisons without notice. Maldives is also one of the few Asian countries that is party to the optional protocol on torture.

Bio Notes on Gasim Ibrahim

¶15. (C) Given the increasingly prominent role of and wide influence exercised by Ibrahim and his potential to succeed Gayoom as President, Embassy is sharing some bio details from time the Ambassador spent with Gasim during the Ambassador's stay on Sun Island for the South Asia Regional Port Security Cooperative (reftel). Gasim described his early life on an island near Sun Island. His father was a relatively poor man who made his living collecting coconuts. Like many young Maldivians, Gasim left his home to attend secondary school in Male.

¶16. (C) Gasim is now one of the richest business people in the Maldives and certainly the most active in politics (see info paragraph 2). He set up his own trading business in 1976 with initial borrowed capital of USD 2,000. Like many Maldivian plutocrats he profited handsomely from his close association with the President to win lucrative rights to develop and own Sun Island and other island resorts and then diversified his holdings from there. Most if not all his holdings are in the Maldives, unlike many other business people who have business interests in India and parts of southeast Asia. He is one of the increasingly rare Maldivian men to have four wives as allowed by the Koran. He married his most recent wife, a much younger woman, the very same day that he was sworn in as Finance Minister. He told the Ambassador he took the oath of office in the morning and held the wedding and reception later the same day. Gasim smokes but does not drink. He speaks excellent English and is well disposed towards Americans, but has not spent significant time in the US.

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